

Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox
Church & ~~Bishop's House~~

HABS No. AK-37 A

Holy Ascension Orthodox Church (Church of the Holy Ascension)
Unalaska
Alaska

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HABS
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ARCHITECTURAL DATA FORM

STATE ALASKA	COUNTY	TOWN OR VICINITY UNALASKA
HISTORIC NAME OF STRUCTURE (INCLUDE SOURCE FOR NAME) Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church & Bishop's House (NHL)		HABS NO. AK-37 A
SECONDARY OR COMMON NAMES OF STRUCTURE Holy Ascension Orthodox Church; Church of the Holy Ascension		
COMPLETE ADDRESS (DESCRIBE LOCATION FOR RURAL SITES) UTMs: 03.399000.5970800; In the village of Unalaska on Unalaska Island.		
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE SOURCE) 1894-1896 (NHL)		ARCHITECT(S) (INCLUDE SOURCE)
SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL, INCLUDE ORIGINAL USE OF STRUCTURE) The Unalaska Orthodox parish included, at the time the church was built, ten chapels strung along the Aleutian Chain. Today the parish is somewhat more restricted, but still covers an expanse of more than 1000 miles. See HABS No AK-37.		
STYLE (IF APPROPRIATE) cruciform		
MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS) wood		
SHAPE AND DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE (SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS ON SEPARATE PAGES ARE ACCEPTABLE) Cruciform; facade: 79'8½"x86'11"; bell-tower extends 13'8" from the body of the church and is 14'6½" wide. narthex: 37'7"; nave: 37'7"x63'4½"; chapels on each end extend 21'x32'4½" wide.		
EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE All roofs of the church are wood shingles painted red, with the exception of the two onion domes which are wood covered with tarpaper, which is painted green. Each of the interior functions of the Church is expressed in each elevation.		
INTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (DESCRIBE FLOOR PLANS, IF NOT SKETCHED) The narthex leads to the nave. On the north and south walls of the nave are the entrances to the two chapels. The east wall of the nave is dominated by the focus of the room, the ikonostasis which extends the width of the church in two tiers.		
MAJOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS WITH DATES		
PRESENT CONDITION AND USE Functioning Russian Orthodox Church.		
OTHER INFORMATION AS APPROPRIATE Part of the Holy Ascension Orthodox Church National Historic Landmark		
SOURCES OF INFORMATION (INCLUDING LISTING ON NATIONAL REGISTER, STATE REGISTERS, ETC.) NHL; AHRs (#UNL005); See Bibliography HABS No. AK-37		
COMPILER, AFFILIATION Sandra M. Faulkenr, Historian, National Park Service		DATE July 29, 1986

Addendum To:
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FOLLOWS...

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
HOLY ASCENSION RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-37-A

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Location: Between Broadway and Bayview avenues, Unalaska, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: One of the oldest Russian Orthodox churches in Alaska, the Holy Ascension Church of 1894 has a cruciform plan but a hip-roofed nave that emphasizes its squareness. Featuring three altars, this church is rivaled only by St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka for size and grandeur. In addition, the site is associated with Fr. Innocent (Veniaminov), the Russian Orthodox missionary priest who studied Aleut language and culture while located here in the early nineteenth century. Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church is a National Historic Landmark.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1894. Bishop Nicholas and Rudolph Newman of the Alaska Commercial Company entered into an agreement for construction of the church on June 2, 1894. On September 12, 1894, the Company billed the consistory for the construction.¹ The south chapel was consecrated September 4, 1894; the north chapel January 30, 1895; and the main church August 18, 1896.
2. Architect: Not known. The Bishop furnished the Alaska Commercial Company with plans, but the Company insisted on hiring an architect--whose name is not known--to provide detailed drawings.² Bishop Nicholas approved the final plans.
3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Rudolph Newman, General Agent of the Alaska Commercial Company, contracted to erect the building for \$9,000. Although the parishioners originally agreed to demolish the previous church, prepare the foundation, and paint the new church, these tasks were accomplished by the

¹ Agreement, June 2, 1894, and Bill, September 19, 1894, Alaskan Russian Church Archives, Unalaska File, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

² Newman to Nicholas, April 10, 1893, Alaskan Russian Church Archives.

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Company for an additional \$350.³

4. Original plans and construction: The church was designed as a whole, with a central nave, two side chapels, a sanctuary in the rear, a narthex, and a belltower in front. There has been speculation that the nave was part of the 1858 church, or that the side chapels were added later, but recent scholarship has shown that this is not the case.⁴

In 1893, Rev. Nicholas Rysev--then the priest at Unalaska--obtained permission to build a new church, but was transferred before it could be built. The task then fell to Rev. Alexander Kedrofsky, who arrived in Unalaska in 1894; his written accounts survive:

In 1894, from June to October, yet another church rose in place of the older, deteriorating one, [this] with two side chapels, through the efforts, diligence, and care for the glory of God of the local parishioners, costing them more than \$9,000. This most recent church to the glory of the Holy Ascension of Our Lord is constructed of siding (redwood) with a shingle roof and two cupolas (one atop the belltower and the other over the main body of the church). . . .

Inside and outside, the church is painted with white oil[-based] paint; in the main church there is a choir loft above the entrance to the church. The church is enclosed by a wooden fence.⁵

The bishop, Nicholas, visited the church in 1897 and noted, "The church at Unalaska is really the best among all the Alaskan churches. . . . [It contains both] beautiful art work and pure Russian architecture."⁶

The church was probably located on the site of the previous church; the north chapel extended to include the site of the 1825-26 church (see section on Previous Churches, below). The nave of the new church was larger than the previous one

³ Agreement, June 2, 1894, and Bill, September 19, 1894, Alaskan Russian Church Archives.

⁴ Barbara Smith, "National Register Nomination: Holy Ascension Orthodox Church" (National Park Service, 1984). The building has been designated a National Historic Landmark and the complete nomination is located in the History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC.

⁵ Alexander Kedrofsky, "Historico-statistical Description of the Unalaska Holy Ascension Parish," Russian Orthodox American Messenger 1 (1896-97): 441-442; cited in Smith.

⁶ "Travels of His Eminence Nicholas, Bishop of the Aleutians and Alaska, Around Alaska," Russian Orthodox American Messenger 1 (August 1-13, 1897): 485; cited in Smith.

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by about a third.⁷

In 1893, the Orthodox church divided Alaska into two administrative districts, based in Sitka and Unalaska. Unalaska's district included the Aleutian parish (containing eight villages in addition to Unalaska); the two parishes of St. George and SS. Peter and Paul on the Pribilof Islands; Belkovsky on the Alaska Peninsula; St. Michael on Norton Sound; Nushagak on the Bering Sea Coast; and the Yukon and Kuskokwim parishes in southwest interior Alaska. This increased responsibility probably accounts for the grandeur of the new church. With the exception of St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka, this is the only church in Alaska with three chapels. The generous proportions and clean lines of the Unalaska church make a significant architectural achievement.

6. Alterations and additions: By ca. 1910, windows had been added in the west wall of the nave, above the narthex roof. Several pieces of ornament have been removed from the belltower, including: spires on the top corners at the base of the cupola; false balconies at the second-story windows; a beltcourse above the second-story windows; the lower half of the cornice fascia board; and the entablatures above the tower's north and south doors. These pieces are shown in early photographs, but do not exist today. A circular molding on three sides has been moved about a foot lower; originally, it projected above the cornice line and fit under the pediments. All of the above alterations were made before 1961.

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

The first church in Unalaska was built in 1808 by Fedor Burenin, the Russian-American Company manager. Depicted in an 1821 watercolor by L. Choris, it was a small octagonal chapel, apparently of log construction, with a cupola. It appears to have been located on the east side of the small town.

This chapel was replaced in 1825-26 by a church designed and built by Rev. Ioann Veniaminov, later consecrated a bishop under the name of Innocent, and canonized as a saint in 1977. The church, which had a dome and a large cupola, was built under his direction, as he was an accomplished carpenter. The iconostas, installed in 1831, he described as "a rather fine ikonostas, with finely wrought columns and carved gilded frames of Aleut workmanship."⁸ The church, the first to be named Holy Ascension, was probably located on the site of the north chapel of the present church.

⁷ Smith.

⁸ Cited in Lydia Black, "The Curious Case of the Unalaska Icons," *Alaska Journal* 12 (Spring 1982):10. The date for the installation is from Paul D. Garrett, *St. Innocent: Apostle to America* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 98. Although it is mis-printed as 1841, the context of the passage puts it at 1831.

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The association of Fr. Innocent (Veniaminov) with this church is significant. Fr. Innocent was Unalaska's first resident priest, arriving in 1824 and staying for ten years. Unlike other missionaries (particularly Americans), Fr. Innocent studied and appreciated native culture; he developed an Aleut alphabet, and trained others to read both Aleut and Slavonic. In 1834, Fr. Innocent was transferred to Sitka where he worked with the Tlingits. In 1840 he was named Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kurile and Aleutian Islands, and in 1858 became an archbishop. In 1870 he was named Metropolitan, or head, of the church in Russia. While expanding the mission of the Russian Orthodox church in America, he also had some success with vaccinations; he wrote histories and ethnographies; and he designed St. Michael's Cathedral and constructed its clock.

In 1858, Fr. Innocent's church was replaced. Located just south of the 1825-26 church, the new church was built under the direction of Rev. Innokenty Shaiashnikov, who like Fr. Innocent was a carpenter. An Aleut, Shaiashnikov served in Unalaska from 1848 to 1883. He noted that timbers from the old church were used for the new one. Photographs show a clapboard-covered church with a two-story nave in an apparently square plan, crowned by a hipped roof with an octagonal cupola supporting an onion dome. There was a sanctuary in the rear and a narthex in front; its gable roof extended forward to cover the belfry, which was open underneath and formed a porch. The nave measured 24-1/2' x 31-1/2'. Shaiashnikov also noted the preservation of the previous ikonostas:

The ikonostasy is of wood, carved, of local craftsmanship, painted white, and in appropriate places decorated with gilt. . . . The ikonostasy was made at the time when the first church was built. It was made by local parishioners. When the new church was built, the ikonostasy was renewed, that is, somewhat touched up with paint and gilt.⁹

After Shaiashnikov's death in 1883, the Alaska Commercial Company supplied a marble gravestone.

Libby Beaman, who visited Unalaska in 1879, described this church:

. . . We visited the Russian church, which is very beautiful and was being made ready to celebrate Ascension Day. Its exterior is in striking contrast to the white frame houses and the sod houses of the natives. It has a bright blue, onion-shaped dome that rests on a bright green tower. The frame structure of the church is a vivid yellow.¹⁰

⁹ Cited by Lydia Black, "The Church of Father Ioann" (ms., 1978), 10; cited in Smith.

¹⁰ Betty John, Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879-1880 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989),

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Although the church has a cruciform plan, the form of the hip-roofed nave emphasizes its squareness. Each element--the nave, two side chapels, sanctuary, narthex, and belltower--reads as a separate architectural element. On the interior, the 36' width of the nave is balanced by the 36' length to the amvon (although the length to the iconostas is 41'-6"). The cavernous interior, with a 22' height, is poorly lit by four insignificant windows in the rear of the nave, providing a striking contrast to the well-lit sanctuary; light streams toward the altar and spills out into the nave.
2. Condition of fabric: The belltower is in a dilapidated, even precarious, state. The rest of the building is in a fair condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building measures 37'-6" x 73'-2", with a 13'-11" x 14'-1" belltower centered on the front.
2. Foundations: Both posts and horizontal hewn logs are used as foundations; they are concealed at the perimeter by horizontal planks.
3. Walls: Redwood novelty siding, approximately 9" wide, painted white.
4. Structural system, framing: wood-framed, with 2" x 6" studs at 16" on center.
5. Stoops: Wood planks form a stoop on the west and south sides of the belltower.
6. Chimneys: Stovepipes protrude from the roofs of the north side of the nave and from each chapel roof.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main door on the west front of the belltower is round-arched, with a pedimented surround; the doors themselves have diagonal plank panels. The doors on either side of the belltower are plain, in a flat-arched surround. There are unused doors on the north and south sides of the chapels; these have a flat-arched entablature.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Most of the windows are six-over-six-light double-hung sash, set in a surround with an entablature and a paneled base. The windows in the nave and sanctuary are wider than those in the narthex and in the east walls of the chapels. Narrow flat-arched windows flank the

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north and south doors. Small round-arched windows are located in the west wall of the narthex (one light) and at the second-story level of the west wall of the nave (four lights).

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The nave has a pyramidal roof, the chapels hip roofs, and the narthex a gable roof; all are covered with wood shingles painted red. There is a molded cornice.
- b. Cupola: The cupola over the nave has an octagonal drum lit by round-arched, pilastered windows. Above the drum is an onion dome covered with asphalt painted aqua. A cross surmounts the dome.
- c. Belltower: The three-story belltower is nearly square in plan (14'-1" x 13'-8"). At the second-story level, which is the location of the bells, there are four-over-four-light windows on three sides. Above that there is a molded bull's-eye ornament, reminiscent of a surround for a clock face. Above that there are pedimented pent roofs with a parapet supporting an octagonal drum with round-arched, pilastered windows. Above the molded cornice is an onion dome, whose asphalt covering is now a mottled dark color.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Entry is made through the belltower, which has doors on four sides. The door on the east leads to the narthex, which has single doors leading to closets on either side. The closets each have two windows, and the south closet contains the stairs to the choir loft. The nave is one large open space, with a warden's desk along the west wall, just south of the door. The iconostas on the east end of the nave is penetrated by doors leading to the sanctuary. North and south of the nave are separate chapels, each with an amvon and iconostas.
- b. Second floor: Stairs in the south side of the narthex lead to a second floor, which contains closets for storage space. To the west, there is access to the second floor of the belltower, which contains the bells. To the east, there is access to the choir loft in the nave.

2. Stairways: The amvon, which is raised three steps, projects at the north and south ends, as well as in a semicircle in the center. The quarter-turn stairway in the narthex is enclosed with beaded boards.

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3. Flooring: The flooring is tongue-and-groove boards, with some carpeting.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: In the nave, the walls are vertical beaded boards; there is a round handrail and a picture rail about 3' below the ceiling. Above the picture rail are fluted pilasters, with a cornice above. On the north wall of the nave, there are two round arches on a solid wall; one contains the much smaller door to the north chapel. The walls are white, and the trim is light blue, except for the pilasters, which are red and gold.

The ceiling is also beaded boards. In the center of the ceiling a six-pointed star is painted on a blue background with gold stars.

Wall and ceiling finish in the chapels, narthex and belltower are similar.

5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Between the narthex and the nave and between the belltower and the narthex, there are tall double doors, each with three panels. The surrounds are plain. Between the nave and the chapels, the single doors are two-panel, with plain surrounds.
 - b. Windows: There are interior windows between the nave and the chapels.
6. Decorative features: The elaborate iconostas, which extends across the east wall of the nave, is divided into eleven parts, separated by colonettes. Each of the oil-on-linen paintings is set in a horseshoe-arched surround; the royal doors are also horseshoe-arched. The wooden parts of the iconostas are painted white with gold trim.

Above the iconostas is an oil-on-linen painting which extends across the east wall. The painting, which has darkened considerably, is believed to have been sent to the church by the last tsar of Russia, and does not appear in early photographs of the church.

A balustrade of bulbous turned balusters is located at the edge of the amvon; the balustrade follows the semicircular projection of the amvon and includes gates. An archway is located above this balustrade, before the royal doors.

The warden's desk and the choir loft also feature balustrades; these are similar to each other, but differ from that on the amvon. The choir loft is a rounded half-hexagon in plan.

Between the pilasters on the upper reaches of the side walls are located eight-pointed metal stars, surmounted by metal flames. In the same location on the east wall, there are some painted icons alternating with sunburst-type metal ornaments.

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Elements of the iconostas in the Chapel of St. Innocent of Irkutsk (north chapel) may date to the church built here in 1825. The iconostas is of vertical beaded tongue-and-groove boards, ornamented with rosettes, swags, and floral motifs. The swag ornament above the icons and the lyre ornament below are seen in a photograph of the iconostas of the previous church and were probably hand-carved by Aleut workmen for the 1825 church. The beaded boards of the iconostas, however, appear to differ from that iconostas, and match the material found on all the walls in the present church. The icons along the top of the screen are believed to have been painted by Vasilii Kriukov, an Aleut artist, and to have been on the iconostas of the first church in Unalaska. The icon of the Last Supper, above the royal doors, probably also dates from the early nineteenth century. The icons of the Christ figure and the Theotokos, flanking the royal doors, hung on the iconostas of the previous church. Other icons currently on the iconostas are of more recent vintage. The royal doors are lattice, with a sunburst in the round arch.

The iconostas in the St. Sergius Chapel (south chapel) is much plainer than the other chapel, ornamented only by some diamond-shaped moldings and the icons, which are painted in a late nineteenth-century style and are set in golden frames. The lattice royal doors have an inverted round arch with a sunburst motif above, and apparently came from the iconostas of the previous church, as they are seen in a photograph. The icons on the deacons doors also came from the previous church. Other icons in this chapel came from villages that were vacated during and after World War II. During the War, all of the Aleuts on the Chain were relocated to sites in Southeast. After the War, the villagers of Attu, Kashega, Chernovskii, and Makushin were relocated to Atka and Unalaska.

There are numerous icons throughout the church. These include two icons in the Byzantine style, both dated 1821; an icon of scenes from the life of the Virgin, which is said to be miracle-working; and an icon of St. Panteleimon covered by a silver riza. In addition, glass exhibit cases contain early Aleut Bibles and other artifacts.

7. Bells: In the second level of the belltower, there is an impressive set of bells with decorative detailing.
8. Mechanical equipment: There is some electricity, although the elaborate multi-level chandelier in the center of the nave is not electrified. There is an oil-fired furnace in the nave and in the north chapel, and a wood stove in the south chapel.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces northwest, with its altar on the southeast end; for simplicity in this report, the front has been referred to as the west, and the altar as on the east.

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The church is located on a narrow neck of land between Iliuliuk Bay on the north and Iliuliuk River on the south. The residential part of Unalaska is located just east of the church, and some commercial and industrial buildings are located west of the church property. The church yard is delineated by a picket fence. The grassy yard contains graves, some with marble and granite stones, others with cast-iron fences; most have wooden crosses. There are some small spruce trees in the yard.

2. Historic landscape design: Historically, the church land had more buildings than at present. The 1908 plat showed an "old custom house" between the church and the Bishop's House (HABS No. AK-37-B). West of the Bishop's House was a schoolhouse and other smaller buildings, including houses for teachers.

The schoolhouse was constructed by the Alaska Commercial Company in 1882 according to plans of Mooser and Pissis, a San Francisco architectural firm commissioned by Bishop Nestor. The one-and-a-half-story building measured approximately 30' x 30' and had a distinctive jerkinhead roof. In about 1893 the school was expanded to include an orphanage, and the building was extended to the east to adjoin the bishop's house in about 1907. It was destroyed by fire in 1960.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: The National Register nomination (cited below) includes copies of original architectural drawings of the school building (since demolished) and the Bishop's House.
- B. Early views: The National Register nomination (cited below) includes a number of historic photographs from several repositories. These include a view of the previous church on the site (from the Huntington Library), a view of the church before windows were added in the west wall of the narthex (from the Alaska Historical Library), a 1910 view (from the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum), a view of the bishop's house and school before 1894 (Huntington Library), and a view of the same ca. 1907, after alteration (Anchorage Museum).

A photograph of the previous church is found in Fern A. Wallace, The Flame of the Candle: A Pictorial History of Russian Orthodox Churches in Alaska (Chilliwack, B.C.: SS. Kyril and Methody Society, 1974), plate 21.

Photograph of iconostas, ca. 1897, Charles S. Hamlin Collection, #728-27L, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Photograph of iconostas of previous church, John Wesley White-James Taylor White Collection, 76-2-257, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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- C. Bibliography: Most of the information for this report was drawn from Barbara Smith's comprehensive National Register nomination, "Holy Ascension Orthodox Church," National Park Service, 1984. The building has been declared a National Historic Landmark and the complete nomination is located in the History Division, National Park Service.

Alaskan Russian Church Archives, Unalaska file, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Black, Lydia. "The Curious Case of the Unalaska Icons." Alaska Journal 12 (Spring 1982): 10.

Garrett, Paul D. St. Innocent: Apostle to America. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979.

John, Betty. Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879-1880. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during the summers of 1989 and 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Raymond Todd, Andrew Feinberg, Lidiya Velichko (USSR), Alex Lashkevich (USSR), Kate Solovjova (USSR), and James Creech, architectural technicians; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
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Aleutian Islands
Alaska

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013

ADDENDUM TO
HOLY ASCENSION RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
(Holy Ascension Orthodox Church)
(Church of the Holy Ascension)
(Russian-American Architecture Project)
Unalaska Island
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